



This is an Open Report

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 27 October 2011

Subject: Township Forums and Engagement

Report of: Corporate Director (Places)

Contact officer: James Winterbottom 01942 487352

Cabinet Portfolio Holder: Councillor K Anderson

Purpose / summary:

This report outlines the key findings of the review of Township Forums and community engagement activity and proposes a new model and approach that is reflective of the current resource environment. This follows the Cabinet decision to suspend Township Forums and initiate a review of forums and related activity.

The model follows the principles of re-framing our approach within the current financial and policy environment so that we can achieve a more fluid, flexible and mainstream approach to neighbourhood engagement; learn from the experience of Township Forums; better harness and support the role of elected members as community leaders; ensure we are suitably placed to respond effectively to emerging localism policies; and realise savings from a reduced resource model.

Alternative options considered and reason for selecting the one recommended:

There are a number of alternative options that have been considered, including:

- Re-instating the Township Forum's and the resource model needed to administer and co-ordinate them.
- Removing all resource and support for engagement and development work.

The recommended option is proposed in order to provide an affordable framework that

ensures a non-bureaucratic, lean way of harnessing the wider, local knowledge and intelligence in our communities; connecting emerging locality / neighbourhood plans to organisational priorities, activity and funding.

Recommendation / decision:

The Cabinet are requested to agree to:-

- Formally ending the Township Forums and not replacing them with another form of council managed locality governance.
- Introduction of an annual event, led by elected members with communities, to develop and evaluate local plans
- Reduction and re-alignment of the resource to develop and co-ordinate local plans and their delivery via Area Management Groups (AMGs)
- The new re-aligned function to be located in the Places Directorate within Neighbourhood Teams to ensure a single place of contact for locality issues and management and co-ordination of AMG activity.
- Wigan in Bloom ring fenced at £100,000 per year in total across the borough, split across township areas, decided in consultation with elected members
- £50,000 for Christmas activities and walking days in total across the borough, split across township areas, in consultation with elected members
- £35,000 per year available to fund activity linked to locality plans managed through AMGs
- Establish six monthly Community Challenge events within the AMG business cycle, led by ward councillors in their civic leadership capacity to review progress against plans and local spending decisions. It will be the role of elected members to ensure appropriate engagement and feedback in communities as to progress on local priorities.
- Carry out further work on community infrastructure levy / neighbourhood plans in line with passing of the Localism Bill; whilst

this new legislation emerges decisions on 106 funding will be taken in consultation with Ward Councillors to ensure no funding passes its cease date.

- Ensuring that, where we support groups with funding, for example through the pooled locality pot or through Brighter Borough funds - we actively engage in appropriate evaluation of impact and broaden our local intelligence and links to our priorities through effective engagement with these groups.
- A review of the new model, approach and funding arrangements after six months.

Key Decision:

This report involves a key decision within ground(s) 1&2.

The decision made as a result of this report will be published within **48 hours** and cannot be actioned until **seven working days** have elapsed, i.e. before 8 November 2011

This item is included in the Forward Plan.

Risks / Implications:

Financial:

The proposals contained in the report will lead to a saving of approximately £130,000 per year from 1 April 2012.

Staffing:

There are 11 officers directly affected by the proposals contained in this report. Re-aligning the resource and function will be carried out by a restructure of the existing team

Policy:

Localism is a key priority for Government and the impact of anticipated legislation will affect our operations in this area. Understanding the likely affect of this, whilst recognising the need to prioritise activity and operate on 30% less budget, has led to the conclusions and recommendations presented in this report.

Equal Opportunities - Has a Diversity Impact Assessment been conducted?

No – see content of the report, this will be undertaken aligned to 2013 budget programme.

Wards affected:

All

Property Implications – Does the proposal involve a reduction, addition or change to the Council’s asset base or its occupation?

No

If yes, have the property implications been agreed with the Property Division?

Has the Head of Service, Legal and Risk (Monitoring Officer) (John Mitchell) confirmed that the recommendations within this report are lawful and comply with the Council’s Constitution? **Yes**

Has the Director Corporate Services (Paul McKeivitt) confirmed that any expenditure referred to within this report is consistent with the Council’s budget? **Yes**

Are any of the recommendations within this report contrary to the Policy Framework of the Council? **No**

* delete which applicable

For Cabinet reports only :

Categorisation of the report:	x		x
Key Decision	x	Corporate Issues	
Non-key Decision		Performance Monitoring	

Tracking/Process:

	Consultation	Ward Members	Partners
Committee	Overview & Scrutiny	Cabinet	Council
		27 October 2011	

There are no Background Papers to this Report within the meaning of Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Proper Officer Gillian Bishop

Date 14th October 2011

Background:

- 1.1 This report outlines the key findings of the review of Township Forums and community engagement activity and proposes a new model and approach that is reflective of the current resource environment. This follows the Cabinet decision to suspend Township Forums and initiate a review of forums and related activity.
- 1.2 The Township Forum model in Wigan consists of 10 Township Forums that were supported and enabled by 5 Township Managers; each Township had a lead Service Director. The current dedicated council resource, in the wider area affected by this report, covers community engagement officers (former PACT and volunteer co-ordination team) and the remaining two township managers and currently totals 11 staff (10.5 FTE), now based in Policy, Intelligence and Programmes service in the Resources Directorate. The cost of this resource is £272k per annum.
- 1.3 Wigan and Leigh Housing carry out a Tenant Engagement function, which is core business to all social housing providers. It is an integral part of the business from how they are governed to day to day services developing and delivering the vision, governance, setting service standards and service delivery. It is also a fundamental element of the regulatory framework for the social housing sector. There are 6 officers funded from the Housing Revenue Account/HRA Management Fee element at a cost of £160k per year; the full budget including communications and grants to groups is approximately £247,000. The staff are primarily involved in supporting the formal tenant engagement framework – Conference, Assemblies, Forums, Tenants groups and tenant led estate improvement projects (clean ups, divisionary activities for young people etc). The annual Better Neighbourhood Fund (£250,000) is agreed by Tenant Board Members and managed by tenants through the Area Housing Forums. All applications for this go to local forums.
- 1.4 Wigan Leisure & Culture Trust had a small resource (2/3 posts) that was dedicated to community engagement. This was particularly linked to work in the regeneration areas under the single regeneration budget programmes of Hag Fold, Worsley Mesnes, Norley Hall, etc. They formed part of a wider team that included play, arts and funding support under the title of ‘Community Regeneration’. However, following the removal of external funding and, more recently, the Trust’s management and back-office review, the dedicated posts and, indeed, the wider structure, no longer exists. The Trust still has an approach to community engagement and this work consists of three strands; stand-alone work (now discontinued); work embedded in mainstream services and based at buildings or other facilities such as the key parks; outreach services.
- 1.5 It must be ensured that a new approach is complementary and efficiently managed ensuring no duplication and best value for money.
- 1.6 Previous financial savings relating to this area include cashable savings of c. £90k (3 Township Manager's) and non cashable savings of approximately £25k per year following the suspension of Forums (democratic service support costs primarily).
- 1.7 Each Township Forum has a budget of £20k per year to fund environmental projects in the township area; total £200k per year. Commitments on these budgets of £50k have been used to fund Christmas lights and walking days; leaving £15k per Township.
- 1.8 These £20k Township pots have also been used to fund Wigan in Bloom at differing levels in each Township in addition to a dedicated central fund of £35k for Wigan in

Bloom activity. For 2011/12 the total spend from Township Forums on Wigan in Bloom is £115,085; an average of £11,500 per Township. In 2010/11 the spend from Township budgets was £103,000. On average this leaves £3,500 per Township (£35k total) from the original £200k allocation.

- 1.9 In addition, decision making on Section 106 open spaces and play funds were taken through forums. There was an additional £83k per year available to forums in total through 'community protection' funding. In addition, Elected Members have access to Brighter Borough funding.
- 1.10 A summary of the key issues raised during the review of Township Forums is attached as Appendix A to this report.

Overview of National Policy Context

- 2.1 As the Localism Bill makes its passage through parliament we are anticipating the elements of the Bill that are likely to survive and their implications on the council, the way we work with our communities and the mechanisms we will need in place to deliver any new requirements. Community Right to Challenge, Community Right to Provide, Neighbourhood Plans, management of Community Infrastructure Levy, local and neighbourhood referendums and changes to planning policy will all transform and put pressure on our ability to respond to sub-borough issues and groups. The Bill will provide a framework for detailed legislation and guidance on a range of issues. For example, consultation on Neighbourhood Plans was published on 13 October 2011 and will run until 5 January 2012.
- 2.2 There are other potential reforms that follow the government's localism agenda, such as the review of local government finance, where neighbourhood level community budgets for example are likely to become a key part of local public service investment and finance during this parliament. Following the recent civil disturbances it is highly likely that the government will implement measures to accelerate programmes like community budgets under their 'guided localism' policy.
- 2.3 The Government, as part of their Big Society agenda, has recently launched the Community First Programme run by the Community Development Foundation. As part of this programme, a small grants fund (£30m) has been established – to be allocated by ward based on an assessment of deprivation and social capital. In Wigan, five wards are eligible for funding through this programme (totals over 4 years): Abram (£33,910), Atherleigh (£33,910), Douglas (£33,910), Ince (£101,730) and Wigan Central (£33,910). The intention of this funding is to help local groups improve their area – there is to be no cost for the council and whilst representation from council's on local Community First Panels is recommended it is not a requirement. Panel's should be genuinely representative of their communities and run by the communities, not the council.

Proposals:

- 3.1 The proposals contained in this report are based on an assessment of the emerging and anticipated future policy requirements, issues raised during the review of Township Forums, and the need to save 30% from the council's budget during the period of the current spending review.

- 3.2 These discussions have concluded that effective engagement with our communities and local groups is more important than ever, but it must be part of everyone's role – officers and ward councillors. We need a non-bureaucratic, lean way of harnessing the wider, local knowledge and intelligence in our communities; connecting emerging locality / neighbourhood plans to organisational priorities, activity and funding; and spending the money better where we retain it. Examples such as the Wigan Borough Sports Council have been highlighted as excellent examples of community led organisation and leadership; a model to influence our future approach. It is clear that a more community led and managed model is emerging through the introduction of Community First Panels and Neighbourhood Forums (for Neighbourhood Planning purposes), as well as the established and continually developing community groups across the borough.
- 3.3 As an organisation we are developing our 5 year corporate strategy. As part of that work, there are a number of related long term outcomes that we will be actively working to achieve, including:
- The council has redefined its relationship with communities who are enabled to manage local services and facilities and are informed and engaged;
 - The cycle of dependency on public services has reduced;
 - Citizenship is actively promoted and volunteering levels have increased.
- 3.4 This is in the context of an organisation that is taking out significant costs due to severely reduced budgets; an organisation that will be smaller and much transformed at the end of this period.
- 3.5 Within this context, it is proposed that the council formally ends the managed Township Forums and does not replace them with an alternative form of managed locality governance. In many areas there is the capacity and willingness to organise without direct support from the council; where groups and individuals in localities wish to organise themselves on a geographic basis that is clearly not a decision for the council to be involved in and ward councillors in their civic leadership role will be responsible for ensuring these groups are appropriately connected to public sector activity.
- 3.6 Taking cost out of this function means reducing the staffing budget and therefore capacity. It will mean a fundamentally different approach and will place greater emphasis on elected ward councillors as community and civic leaders; connecting community groups and bodies in their ward constituencies to identify local priorities and ensure appropriate co-ordination with local public services. Such a new approach also places a greater emphasis on local public sector reform – reducing the cycle of dependency on public services.
- 3.7 A review of Area Management Groups (AMGs) has run concurrently to this review and is part of the wider view of our approach for the future. The review of AMGs has concluded that they should continue to operate on a twin-township footprint with a purpose of, 'Solving locality issues in partnership when one single agency cannot resolve them alone'. It is proposed that the membership of the AMGs will be flexible to reflect key locality priorities, with elected members ensuring community priorities are fed into AMGs through local plans, with a clear intelligence-led evidence base for the locality, driving activity. Elected Members will play a key role in evaluating progress against these plans on a six-monthly basis by leading community challenge

in the AMGs. It is proposed that Elected Members will feed back issues and progress to communities following this process.

3.8 The key recommendations to Cabinet are:

- a) Formally ending the Township Forums and not replacing them with another form of council managed locality governance. There have been many successes achieved through Forum's, but the significant reduction in budgets and the changing local and national picture means that this model is no longer sustainable.
- b) An annual event to be established, potentially linked to the Partnership Convention, to develop and evaluate local priority plans. These events will be elected member led with communities.
- c) A reduced and re-aligned resource to develop and co-ordinate local plans via AMGs and use of locality budgets as appropriate; identifying links to our organisational plans and priorities and revenue spending plans; and to carry out community development activity on key local issues together with local community groups and elected members. It is important that this activity is used to enhance our core evidence base to support intelligence-led decision making and is connected as appropriate to key change and transformation work in the council and partner organisations.
- d) The new re-aligned function will be located in the Places Directorate within Neighbourhood Teams to ensure a single place of contact for locality issues and management and co-ordination of AMG activity.
- e) With regards to current 'locality budgets':
 - Wigan in Bloom ring fenced at £100,000 per year in total across the borough, split across township areas, spend decided in consultation with elected members in that locality.
 - £50,000 for Christmas activities and walking days in total across the borough, split across township areas, spend decided in consultation with elected members in that locality.
 - £35,000 per year available to fund activity linked to locality plans, managed through the AMGs with Elected Members.
- f) Six monthly Community Challenge events within the AMG business cycle, led by ward councillors in their civic leadership capacity to review progress against plans and local spending decisions. It will be the role of elected members to ensure appropriate engagement and feedback in communities as to progress on local priorities. These will be linked to the annual meeting outlined in recommendation (b) where local priorities will be identified to feed into developed plans with AMGs. The evaluation of progress from the second challenge event of the year will be taken by Elected Members to their respective annual planning meeting.
- g) Further work on community infrastructure levy / neighbourhood plans in line with passing of the Localism Bill; whilst this new legislation emerges decisions on 106 funding will be taken in consultation with Ward Councillors to ensure no funding passes its cease date.
- h) Ensuring that, where we support groups with funding, for example through the pooled locality pot or through Brighter Borough funds - we actively engage in appropriate

evaluation of impact and broaden our local intelligence and links to our priorities through effective engagement with these groups.

- i) A review of the new model, approach and funding arrangements after six months.

Alternative options considered and reason for the recommended option:

- 4.1 There are a number of alternative options that have been considered, including:
 - Re-instating the Township Forum's and the resource model needed to administer and co-ordinate them.
 - Removing all resource and support for engagement and development work.
- 4.2 The recommended option is proposed in order to provide an affordable framework that ensures a non-bureaucratic, lean way of harnessing the wider, local knowledge and intelligence in our communities; connecting emerging locality / neighbourhood plans to organisational priorities, activity and funding.

Conclusions:

- 5.1 As a major decision, with clear impact on the borough's communities, it is vital that a comprehensive impact assessment is completed to ensure that our sustained approach to neighbourhood engagement is fair and accessible. An initial scoping assessment has shown the need for a period of review while the impact of the considerable changes proposed is measured. This will be considered also in the context of the impact assessment of the 12/13 budget savings programme.
- 5.2 The recommendations in this report include a review period running to May 2012, when a full evaluation of impact, including equality impact, will be provided to Cabinet. This will allow members to confirm, or amend, the approach to neighbourhood engagement informed by an account of the impact on groups of people with protected characteristics.
- 5.3 If Cabinet accept the proposals in this report we can move quickly to implementation. This will include:

Communication of the decision to Joint Chair's of the Township Forums and affected staff	Oct 2011
Resourcing the model through restructure of current team & launch	Nov / Dec 2011
Communication of the new approach to elected members (members seminar)	Dec 2011
Six month review to evaluate the impact and success of the new model.	May 2011

- 5.4 Savings (cashable of approximately £130,000) will be achieved before the start of the next financial year through a restructure to fit the new function and requirements based on the proposals contained in the report.
- 5.5 As we work through the evaluation of the new model, further work will be carried out to explore the most appropriate, efficient and effective connection with Wigan and Leigh Housing's engagement resources and approach. This, alongside agreed recommendations from the evaluation will form phase 2 of this approach.

Appendix A: Key Findings from the review of Township Forums

- 1.1 In January 2011, Cabinet received a report on the Localism Bill and its implications for Area Management, Township Forums and community engagement. The report concluded that the Localism Bill reinforced the Council's commitment over many years to strengthening local accountability, but that emerging picture suggested that the current ways in which we encourage locality working and local empowerment were not fit for purpose.
- 1.2 The report confirmed that community engagement remained a priority for the Council and its partners. However, as plans developed for engagement and governance these would need to take account of the impact of the reduced financial settlement and the need to deliver efficiencies.
- 1.3 The decision of Cabinet, as a result of the report, was that the Township Forum programme of meetings in their current format should be suspended with immediate effect; a review of forums and related activity was initiated.
- 1.4 The views of forums on the purpose of neighbourhood engagement and the ways in which local areas might be engaged are diverse. Most are concerned with how to encourage community organisations to support each other and develop their skills and knowledge. But a sizeable number are looking to confirm a local decision making model with a budget attached.
- 1.5 The discussions have also ranged in their level of detail – some township areas feel highly organised with a very clear vision of where they'd like to be. Others are more concerned with a lack of community involvement and capacity and are looking for a more fluid approach.
- 1.6 Despite this diverse approach, there were a number of **common issues** being discussed at most, if not all, forums;

Local Plans/Resources

- Local neighbourhood/ward plans with short and long term actions and clear expectations of responsibility and timescales
- Helping local people take action on things that are important to them
- Councillors championing local plans and partners supporting them

Communication and Information

- Modernising the methods we use to inform and engage; community websites
- Important for the Council and other organisations to hear about local issues from local people
- Making information available in a way that works for local people.

Influencing Decision Making

- If we ask people to get involved we need to be clear why we want them to be
- Removing barriers so that more can get involved
- Local people able to make decisions that influence and shape services.

Understanding Skills and Knowledge

- Sharing skills, finding what we can offer each other
- Community organisations coming together to share knowledge and to develop action groups, working together to solve problems

- Helping people to understand the skills they have and to develop new ones.
- Identifying key 'professional' skills in the area that can be accessed

Community Pride

- Setting an example, being positive about our communities
- Value and celebrate the energy and commitment of people
- Shared projects – issues that local people can connect with, things they have in common.

1.7 There are again some consistent themes in terms of the support being looked for;

Funding

administration costs, particularly for community websites
 project funds, continuing with what is currently available (at least) but distributed at a ward level
 held directly by local organisations or opportunity for draw down against agreed criteria
 access to funding advisors, how to fund raise money

Advice and Guidance

support with 'troubleshooting' and removing barriers
 training for volunteers needing to develop new skills
 someone to make connections within areas and between areas
 as and when needed, or named liaison officer attached who has knowledge of the area

Getting more people involved

information from agencies about local groups and volunteers they work with
 help with organising community conferences that bring local organisations together to reflect on progress and challenges which might include award ceremonies for volunteers
 helping locality organisations to recruit new members
 bringing groups together to work on common issues

Information

timely information about borough issues with local significance and themed public meetings across boundaries
 analysis of important local data on an area basis and guidance on who this affects
 information provided in a format local people can use

Communication

technical support for setting up community websites and support with setting up Local Information Points for non-electronic communication
 support with developing and distributing newsletters
 help to find opportunities to celebrate local opportunities and successes

Services working differently

a Charter that sets out minimum standards for local services
 access to a 'who's who' of council officers who then have a 'can do' approach
 being open and transparent about the reasons behind local decisions

officers who take time to build relationships with local organisations and are more visible

Access to decision makers

committed and consistent attendance by councillors who do not use meetings for political purposes
access to senior managers, when needed or on a regular basis

- 1.8 The debate at forum level has also highlighted some challenges from forum members - both elected members and community representatives:

Maintaining Goodwill

Many forum members have expressed concern about the impact that this transition period may have on the commitment and co-operation of communities. Whilst many forum members have become disillusioned with the way in which forums have run, especially in recent months, not all feel that they have 'failed'. Some have considerable pride in their accomplishments. Some have also expressed concern about what they see as a lack of consultation by the Council before deciding to 'suspend' standard business meetings.

Local Budgets

It is clear that most forum members, but not all, have valued the local discretionary budgets that they have had access to and have made decisions on including PACT, the Environmental Budget, and Section 106 monies.

Ward Based Approach

A number of townships (Orrell, Tyldesley, Standish, Golborne, Hindley) are keen to see engagement progressed at a ward and not township level. In some cases, this model of working is well developed and local 'networks' are likely to operate on a ward basis regardless of the support offered, or not, by the Council.

Accountability

Many, but again not all, township forums feel strongly that a consistent mechanism needs to be in place to hold the Council, and other partners, to account at a local level. The point has been made in debate that the Council is accountable to its citizens in a range of existing ways, not least through the ballot box, but this issue has continued to resonate. Again, the Localism Bill has been quoted as support for this viewpoint.

Tensions within Townships

It has long been recognised that tensions within townships have acted as a barrier to making significant progress in some areas. All forums have recognised this during the review but are not normally clear about how this might be effectively resolved.